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SF PERUSALS

A Month in the Country

A Comedy in Two Acts

by Ivan Turgenev

Adapted into English by
Emlyn Williams

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
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A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

STORY OF THE PLAY

(9 males; 5 females)

A romantic costume comedy, set in a Russian country house towards the middle of last century—a comedy with delicate undertones of irony and pathos. Natalia Petrovna, a beautiful and coquettish wife of twenty-nine, bored with her old admirer Rakitin and his world-weary charm, and longing for romance, falls in love with Beliaev, her son's new tutor, who is himself in love with Natalia's ward, Vera. The emotional storms resulting from this situation resolve themselves in a gentle finale. The rascally Doctor is an amusing and knowing bystander. Other smaller but good parts are—Natalia's practical-minded husband, sympathetic but dense; the old maid, Lizaveta Bogdanovna; Kolia, Natalia's schoolboy son.

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY

Comedy by Ivan Turgenev, adapted by Emlyn Williams, staged by Michael Redgrave; settings and lighting by Klaus Holm; costumes by Alvin Colt, presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, April 3, 1956.

The Cast:

SHAAF ..... *Lou Gilbert*
ANNA SEMYENOVNA YSLAEVA ... *Mary Morris*
LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA . *Ann Hennessey*
NATALIA PETROVNA .... *Uta Hagen*
RAKITIN ..... *Alexander Scourby*
KOLIA ..... *Tony Atkins*
BELIAEV ..... *Al Hedison*
MATVEI ..... *Stefan Gierasch*
A FOOTMAN ..... *Sorrell Booke*
IGNATY ILLYICH SHPICHELSKY .. *Luther Adler*
VERA ..... *Olga Bielinska*
YSLAEV ..... *Michael Strong*
KATIA ..... *Anne Meara*
BOLSHINTSOV ..... *Martin Wolfson*

The action takes place on Yslaev's estate in the country near Moscow.

The time is in the early forties of the last century.

ACT ONE

SCENE I: *The drawing room—a summer afternoon.*

SCENE II: *A corner of the garden—late afternoon of the next day.*

SCENE III: *The drawing room—the next morning.*

ACT TWO

SCENE I: *The drawing room—a few hours later. Afternoon.*

SCENE II: *A corner of the garden—a few hours later. Evening.*

SCENE III: *The drawing room—the next morning.*

A Month in the Country

ACT ONE

Scene I

While the curtain is still down Vera *is heard playing at the pianoforte in the ballroom: a mazurka of Chopin. A pause.*

THE CURTAIN RISES slowly.

The drawing-room of Yslaev's house on his estate in the country near Moscow, Russia; a summer afternoon. An almost triangular view of the room, with in the Left wall ('Left' and 'Right' throughout refer to the audience's Left and Right) large French window opening on to the garden, and in the Right wall (up a step and beyond pillars) folding doors (opening onstage) leading to the ballroom; a smaller window to the Left of them; to the Right of them, an entrance leading off Right, presumably to the hall, the dining-room, and the stairs; to the Right again, this side of the pillars and nearer the audience, a smaller door leading to the study. The room is beautifully furnished. The native Russian merging into great elegance of detail (markedly French in influence), revealing the taste of a well-bred young hostess. On the Left, between the windows and the audience, a desk and desk-chair; a table: in the angle between the French windows and the pillars, a tall ornamented Russian stove; an armchair; a Récamier sofa; a foot-stool; a long stool; a mirror over desk.

It is a beautiful summer afternoon, in the early forties of the last century.

At the table are seated ANNA SEMYENOVNA YSLAEVA *(Yslaev's mother), a fussy old lady who is used to her own way:* LIZAVETA BOGDANOVA *(her companion), thirty-seven, whose looks have long ago grown shabby through an incessant anxious desire to please her betters: and* SHAAF, *a middle-aged German tutor, ugly, slow and stupid He has a strong German accent. They are playing preference. At some distance from them are* NATALIA *and* RAKITIN. *She is a beautiful, exquisite creature of twenty nine, elegantly posed on the sofa; he is a fine-looking, thoughtful man of great breeding, a year or two older. He sits on the footstool almost at her feet, a book open on his knees, looking at her; she has laid down her embroidery and is fanning herself.*

A pause; the MUSIC begins again. For a space of time after the curtain rises, the only movement is the fingers of the card-players and the flutter of NATALIA'S *fan, as she listens to the music. The MUSIC comes to an end. A pause.*

SHAAF. Har-r-tz.

ANNA. Hearts again? If this goes on, my friend, you'll have the clothes off our backs—

SHAAF. *(Phlegmatically)* Eight har-r-tz.

ANNA. *(To* LIZAVETA) Did you ever know such a madcap? I declare, there's no playing with him—

LIZAVETA. *(Smiling and nodding)* None at all— *(Sniffing from a box)* So true—

ANNA. And you stop taking snuff, I've told you how bad it is for you.

LIZAVETA. Just this once—

(A pause.)

NATALIA. *(To* RATKIN) Why have you stopped reading?

RAKITIN *(Reading)* 'Monte-Cristo se redressa haletant'— *(Looking up at her)* Are you interested?

NATALIA. No.

RAKITIN. Then why ask me to plough through—

NATALIA. It's perfectly simple why. The other day a woman said to me 'Have you read *Monte-Cristo*—my dear, you must, it's captivating!' I didn't say a word at the time, but now I shall be able to tell her I *have* read it, and that it isn't captivating at all. Do go on.

RAKITIN. *(Looking for his place in the book)* 'Se re-dressa haletant, et—'

NATALIA. Have you seen Arkady today?

RAKITIN. Yes, ran into him working by the dam.

NATALIA. Was ever a woman blessed with such a pillar of industry for a husband?

RAKITIN. He wanted to explain something to the workmen, and walked into the sand right up to his knees.

NATALIA. How like him— He attacks everything with too much enthusiasm—he tries too hard. And I consider that a fault. Don't you agree?

RAKITIN. Yes, I do.

NATALIA. Oh, how boring of you— You always agree with me. Read me more.

SHAAF. *(As* RAKITIN *turns over pages)* Har-r-tz.

ANNA. What, again? Really, Shaaf, this is not to be borne! *(To* NATALIA) Daughter-in-law, do you know what —daughter-in-law!

NATALIA. *(Paying attention with difficulty)* Yes

ANNA. What do you think, dear, our Prussian friend's beating us with the most monstrous tactics—

SHAAF. Und now aggin zeven har-r-tz.

ANNA. *(Rising and gathering up the cards)* We're changing over to whist— *(To* NATALIA) But where's our little treasure?

NATALIA. Kolia? Gone for a walk with his new tutor.

ANNA. Ah— Now whist— *(Smartly flicking cards)* Lizaveta Bogdanovna, you're my partner—

LIZAVETA. Oh, do you mean it—an honor—

RAKITIN. *(To* NATALIA) Did you say something about a new tutor?

NATALIA. We acquired one while you were away, for general knowledge.

RAKITIN. Another old fogey?

NATALIA No— My dear, I tell you what—you know how you love watching people, probing like a dentist into their innermost thoughts—

RAKITIN. Oh come—

NATALIA. I want you to focus your attention on him.

RAKITIN. The new tutor? Why?

NATALIA. Because I like him.

RAKITIN. Describe him to me.

NATALIA. Oh—well. Tall Fair. Very young—

RAKITIN. Yes?

NATALIA. Very good eyes, that look straight at you, with an expression of great liveliness

RAKITIN. Yes?

NATALIA. The whole face bears a marked air of vigor—something—

RAKITIN. Go on.

NATALIA Something—forceful—but you'll see for yourself. There's one thing, though—his manner's a trifle gauche, and that's a grave defect in the eyes of a man of the world like you.

RAKITIN. I'm not in your good books today, I can see that—

NATALIA. Seriously, Rakitin, do have a look at him, it's my opinion he has the makings of a fine man Though Heavens knows, it's too early to say—

RAKITIN. You have whetted my curiosity.

NATALIA. I'm so glad— Shall we read?

RAKITIN. *(Reading)* 'Se redressa haletant, et—'

NATALIA. But where's Vera? I haven't set eyes on her since this morning—

(As RAKITIN *shuts his book.)*

Ah— Tell me some news.

RAKITIN What do you wish to hear? About my visit to the Krinitsins?

NATALIA. If you like. How are our newly-weds?

RAKITIN. Time lies heavy on their hands.

NATALIA. Already? Jamais! But how did you find out?

RAKITIN. Can one conceal boredom? Everything else, but boredom—no

NATALIA. *(Looking at him)* Can one conceal—everything else?

RAKITIN. I think so.

NATALIA. *(A pause She looks away)* What did you do there?

RAKITIN. Nothing; I was bored too, and to be bored by one's friends is a calamity One feels at ease and relaxed, one breathes an air of affecton—and one is bored To extinction. The heart aches stupidly, as if it were hungry.

NATALIA. A clever man like you must often find the world very dull—

RAKITIN. *(Quietly, with meaning)* You're talking as if you had no idea what it felt like to live with a creature whom you love and who bores you.

NATALIA. 'Love' is a big word— You're a subtle creature, Rakitin, aren't you?

RAKITIN. Am I?

NATALIA. Over-subtle, in fact; it's your Achilles heel. You're as clever as a cartload of old professors. Sometimes, when you and I are talking, I feel we're just—making lace.

RAKITIN. Lace?

NATALIA. Have you ever watched women making lace? They sit in stuffy rooms, and never move an inch to the left or to the right. Lace is a lovely thing, but on a hot day I'd sooner have a drink of icy fresh water.

RAKITIN. Natalia Petrovna, you're annoyed with me.

NATALIA. Am I?

RAKITIN. I don't know quite why, but you are.

NATALIA. When men pride themselves on their subtlety, they have even less insight than when they don't— No, I'm not annoyed with you—

ANNA. At last! He's over-reached himself— *(Rising)* played right into our hands! The rascal's over-reached himself! My luck's turned, where's my purse— *(She crosses and rummages in the desk.)*

SHAAF. *(Sulkily)* It iss de fault von Lizaveta Bogdanovna.

LIZAVETA. *(Annoyed)* Oh, I protest! How was I to know that Anna Semyenovna had no hearts?

(During this, RAKITIN *rises, walks, then turns and surveys* NATALIA.)

SHAAF. In de future, vid Lizaveta Bogdanovna ás my partner, I do not play. *(He counts his winnings and writes figures in a pocket-book.)*

LIZAVETA. That suits me to a T, Herr Shaaf— Well, upon my word!

ANNA. *(Calling)* Shuffle the cards, Lizaveta Bogdanovna, and stop airing your views!

RAKITIN. *(To* NATALIA) The more I look at you today, the less I recognize you. You've changed, in some way—

NATALIA. Really? How interesting.

(KOLIA *runs in from the garden, and hurries to* ANNA SEMYONOVNA. *He is an attractive child of ten.)*

KOLIA. Granny! Granny! *(Covering her eyes with one hand)* Guess what I've got!

ANNA. Now let me think—what can Granny's little treasure have for Granny!—

(As KOLIA *uncovers her eyes and brings out a bow and arrows from behind his back.)*

Oh, what a lovely toy! Now who made this for you?

KOLIA. *(Pointing to the garden)* He did!

(RAKITIN *turns.* BELIAEV *appears shyly at the windows. He is a slight, personable youth of twenty-one, carefully but shabbily dressed; at the moment he is particularly coltish and self-conscious, but once he is at ease with people of his own age, all that breaks down and he becomes a high-spirited impressionable student. He carries books.)*

ANNA. Really, it's beautifully put together— *(Rising and going back to the* OTHERS) —and now to work—

KOLIA. D'you know what, Granny? I shot with it, twice, Granny, twice! I aimed at a tree, Granny, and I hit it! Both times, Granny! Both times—

NATALIA. Show me, Kolia.

KOLIA *(Running to her and giving her the bow to examine)* Oh, Mamma, you should see the way he climbs trees, better than a squirrel—and he wants to teach me the way to, *and* he wants to teach me how to swim on my back —He's going to teach me everything there is,everything in the world, Mamma!

NATALIA. *(To* BELIAEV) It's so very kind of you to take such pains with him. I'm extremely obliged.

(BELIAEV *bows to her.)*

KOLIA. *(Running to* BELIAEV) Let's run as far as the stables, Alexei Nikolaich, shall we? And take some bread for Favourite!

BELIAEV. Shall we? That's a good idea—

ANNA. *(As* KOLIA *runs out by the windows)* Come and give Granny a kiss first, darling—

KOLIA. *(In the garden)* Later, Granny, later—

(BELIAEV *smiles sheepishly at* RAKITIN *and* NATALIA *and follows* KOLIA *into the garden.)*

ANNA. What a little pet that child is, what a charmer! *(To* SHAAF *and* LIZAVETA BOGDANOVNA, *insistently)* Don't you agree?

LIZAVETA. An angel, no more no less—

SHAAF. Boodiful, boodiful—pass.

NATALIA. *(To* RAKITIN) Well, what did you think of him?

RAKITIN. Think of whom?

NATALIA. Why, the new tutor! You are provoking—

RAKITIN. Let me see, his eyes—yes, it's a good face. He seems very shy, doesn't he?

NATALIA. I tell you what, Rakitan! Let's make a hobby of him!

RAKITIN. How do you mean?

NATALIA. Complete his education! It's a unique chance for sedate, sensible people like us to exercise our virtues. You and I are eminently sensible, are we not?

RAKITIN. You find this boy interesting? He'd be flattered if he knew.

NATALIA Ah, would he? I'm afraid, my dear, just because you and I study ourselves with the greatest industry, we bask in the belief that we know all about everybody else. But he isn't like us, not the least little bit.

RAKITIN. You're perfectly right. The soul of another man is a dark forest—

NATALIA. *(Ironically)* So true, so true—

RAKITIN. Why are you continually mocking me?

NATALIA If one can't tease one's friends, whom can one tease? And you're my friend. *(Pressing his hand)* My old friend. As if you didn't know—ce que vous êtes pour moi.

RAKITIN. Natalia Petrovna, you play with me like a cat with a mouse!

NATALIA. Oh, do I?

ANNA. That means I've won twenty from you, Herr Shaaf—things are on the mend!

SHAAF. In de future, vid Lizaveta Bogdanovna as my partner, I do not play.

MATVEI. *(Enters from the ballroom. He is a manservant, about forty. Announcing)* Igaty Illyich Shpichelsky!

(DOCTOR SHPICHELSKY *follows on his heels. He is a big, attractive man, with tremendous personality; behind his social manner* [*in which breezy exuberance alternates with portentous solemnity, the manner of a born comedian*] *he hides a sly, watchful and sardonic nature. It is clear from everybody's reaction to him that he is accepted as a great wag.)*

THE DOCTOR. Stuff and nonsense, man, you don't announce a doctor, it'll be the undertaker next!

(As ANNA *laughs, and* MATVEI *goes back, closing the doors, stifling a smile.)*

My undying regards to one and all, and all and one! *(Kissing* ANNA'S *hand)* And how is our charming duenna? Making her fortune?

ANNA. Fortune, the idea—

THE DOCTOR. The season's greeting to Natalia Petrovna, and ditto— *(To* RAKITIN) —to Mihail Alexandrovitch!

NATALIA. How are you, Doctor, are you well?

THE DOCTOR. 'How are you, Doctor, are you well'—now what a question, I ask you! What else can a physician do, but burst with health? No doctor worth his salt ever gets ill—he just dies. *(Taking snuff.)*

NATALIA Do sit down—

THE DOCTOR. *(Sitting in the armchair)* And what of *your* health, good lady?

NATALIA. Sound enough, Doctor, but I'm in a bad mood today. And that's a kind of disorder, isn't it?

THE DOCTOR. *(Rising)* Ah me, ah me, lackaday— *(With mock seriousness, feeling her pulse)* Do you know what's the matter with you, Natalia Petrovna?

NATALIA. No, what?

THE DOCTOR. Too serious-minded.

NATALIA. *(Rapping him with her fan)* Oh!

THE DOCTOR. There's nothing like a good laugh for bustling up the circulation. *(Sitting again)* Though a couple of my special pink drops won't do you any harm.

NATALIA. But I'm more than willing to laugh. Now, Doctor, you've a tongue like a rapier—which is what I like and respect you for—tell me something amusing—vite!

THE DOCTOR. At your service, peerless lady. Though I wasn't prepared to be held up for jokes at the point of a pistol—blindfold but unbowed, I walk the plank—

RAKITIN. *(Sitting on the footstool)* Ah—

THE DOCTOR. You know Verenitsin Platon-Vassilevitch?

NATALIA. I know whom you mean, yes—

THE DOCTOR. Well, he has a mad sister. 'Smatter o' fact, they're so dead alike that if she's mad he must be too, and if he's sane then she's no lunatic, but that's neither here nor there; all we know is that over every man jack of us there hovers the inscrutable—if rather grubby—finger of Fate; only the other day, with my own fair hands, I poured a basin of cold water over the lady, and when she was dried she was madder than ever—but still— Her brother has a daughter, a greeny-colored wench with pale little eyes, a red little nose and the chance of inheriting three hundred serfs from Auntie, which makes her perfect. Lunatics live for ever, so Auntie looks like being with us for quite a time, but one hopes for the best—anyway Papa claps her on the market, and various eligibles bob up: among them a certain Perekusov, thin as a rake and shy as a rabbit, but the highest principles. Papa fancies him, Miss fancies him, slap the young codger on the back, prod him in the belly, and publish the banns— But wait! Scene, the Grand Marshal's Ball, gaiety at its height; hey presto, jack-in-the-box-out-of-the-blue, Ardalion Protobekassov— *(Clicking his heels)* —an officer!

NATALIA. Ahh—

THE DOCTOR. 'Mademoiselle, may I have the honor—' *(Clicking his heels)* One polka. Two more polkas. *(Clicking his heels, smartly, twice)* Then we sit out, the military eyes start rolling like drums, and mademoiselle's head is turned as neat as a water-tap, swish— Tears, moans, breathe the word 'wedding' and she goes into a series of elegant fits. 'Bless my soul,' thinks Papa, 'well, if she wants the officer, I'll prove I'm her great-hearted father, anyway he's got money too.' So in the twinkling of a bed-post the officer is invited, does a pinch of courting, offers hand and heart. And then—what?

NATALIA. Happy ever after?

THE DOCTOR. That's what *you* think. Tears and fits again, a terrible rumpus. This time Papa's completely at

sea. 'Now look here, my girl, which of 'em *do* you want?' And what d'you think her answer is?

RAKITIN. What?

THE DOCTOR. 'Papa, I've no idea—and yet my distress is profound. I am a woman who loves two men at the same time.'

(An awkward pause. He studies his fingernails. RAKITIN *rises slowly.)*

And there we are, that's the sort of thing goes on in these parts. *(He takes snuff.)*

NATALIA. I don't find it so staggering. Cannot one love two people at once?

RAKITIN. You think so?

NATALIA. *(Catching his eye, then rising and walking slowly to the windows)* I don't know, though—perhaps it proves you don't really love either.

THE DOCTOR. *(Catching her eye)* Exactly—hit the nail on the head.

ANNA. *(Rising)* My legs have gone to sleep, but I've got my money back— Ah! *(To* SHAAF) You owe me seventy copecks, *I*'m going to do the fleecing for a change— *(Walking towards the hall)* Forty winks before tea, that game's killed me—worth it, though—quick march, Liza, don't dawdle—

LIZAVETA. *(Rising, and scrabbling about on the card table)* Coming—I'm filling your reticule—

ANNA. My legs, my legs— *(She goes out into the hall.)*

(NATALIA *comes down, sits at the desk, takes up a brush, and makes idle strokes on a watercolor propped on the desk.)*

THE DOCTOR. Lizaveta Bogdanovna, snuff?

LIZAVETA. *(Simpering)* I oughtn't to—

THE DOCTOR. Come, give that devil in you a chance—

LIZAVETA. Oh, Doctor—

ANNA'S VOICE. *(In the hall, as* LIZAVETA *takes a pinch)* Liza!

LIZAVETA. *(Calling)* Coming!

(She sneezes, and hurries into the hall SHAAF *collects the cards.)*

THE DOCTOR. *(To* RAKITIN, *quietly)* So you've no idea what is the matter with her today?

RAKITIN. Not the faintest.

THE DOCTOR. Well, if you don't know—

(RAKITIN *meets his eyes, goes up humming, and plays an idle game of patience;* SHAAF *is still writing in his pocket book.* THE DOCTOR *clears his throat and crosses to* NATALIA.)

(With false bonhomie) Er—Natalia Petrovna! I have a little matter of business to go into with you!

NATALIA. *(Painting)* Business? Monsieur le Diplomate, you make me quite nervous!

THE DOCTOR. Actually, it's to do with a third party. A crony of mine.

NATALIA. Do I know him?

THE DOCTOR. You do indeed! He is no less than your neighbor.

NATALIA. *(Still painting)* Old Bolshintsov? Yes?

THE DOCTOR. He has asked me to find out what your plans are for your ward.

NATALIA. *(Turns and stares at him)* For Vera Alexandrovna?

THE DOCTOR. Not to put too fine a point, this crony of mine—

NATALIA. You don't mean to say he wants to marry her?

THE DOCTOR. The whole thing in a nutshell.

NATALIA. You're being facetious, aren't you?

THE DOCTOR. I'm not, for a change.

NATALIA. But my dear man, she's a child! *(Laughing)* What a fantastic errand!

THE DOCTOR. Oh, I don't see why—my friend—

NATALIA. Of course one mustn't forget that almost before you're a doctor, you're a business man—

THE DOCTOR. *(Jovially)* You slander me, dear lady—

NATALIA. Who is this *friend* of yours, Monsieur le Diplomate?

THE DOCTOR. Excuse me, you haven't given me any indication—

NATALIA. But really, Doctor, I've told you, she's a child—

(VERA *and* KOLIA *run in from the garden, from the Left of the windows;* VERA *is a beautiful, immature girl of seventeen, timid and highly strung.)*

KOLIA. *(Running to* RAKITIN) Could we have some glue, do you think? Could we have some glue?

RAKITIN. *(To* KOLIA) And what d'you want with glue, suddenly?

(VERA *curtseys breathlessly to* THE DOCTOR, *and sits.)*

KOLIA. Oh, it's necessary, sir, absolutely essential—what d'you think my new tutor's making for me?—a kite!—so we must have some glue, mustn't we—may we?

RAKITIN. *(About to ring the bell)* In a twinkling—

SHAAF. Erlauben Sir— Monsieur Kolia has not his Cherman lesson today prepared. *(Taking* KOLIA's *hand)* Kimmen Sie—

KOLIA. *(Imploring)* Tomorrow—Morgen, Morgen—*(Struggling)* No, Herr Shaaf—please—

NATALIA. Kolia!

RAKITIN. *(To* NATALIA) It's rather a shame, they're making a kite, and he's being kidnapped for a German lesson—

SHAAF. *(With dignity)* Gnädige Frau—

NATALIA. *(Severely, to* KOLIA) Kolia, you've had quite enough tearing around for one day—

KOLIA. But, Maman—

NATALIA. Do you hear me?

KOLIA. *(Whispering, to* RAKITIN) Try and get us some glue, sir, will you, please? Cross my heart, sir? Please?

SHAAF. Kommen Sie—yonk vicked man—yonk vicked man—

(He pilots KOLIA *into the ballroom.* RAKITIN *follows them.* VERA *rises and walks.)*

NATALIA *(Seeing her)* Vera my dear, how flushed you are! I haven't seen you since this morning. What have you been doing all this time?

VERA. I've been with the new tutor.

NATALIA. *(After a pause, looking at her)* Really?

VERA. Oh, and Kolia—

NATALIA. Sit down, dear, you must be worn out.

THE DOCTOR. *(As* VERA *obeys)* But running about is good for one, at that age.

NATALIA. Oh— Ah well, Doctor, you know best— *(To* VERA) Tell me what you did in the garden.

(She crosses and sits in the airmchair. THE DOCTOR *watches them.)*

VERA. We played games, then he climbed a tree—

NATALIA. Kolia? Never—

VERA. No no, the—new tutor. He was chasing a squirrel, and he climbed up and up, till he could shake the top—we felt quite frightened—then he made a bow-and-arrow for Kolia—then he betted me that I couldn't play a mazurka, and I won, then we ran out again, and then—oh, I don't think I ought to tell you—

NATALIA. But I insist—

VERA. He crept up to one of your cows, made one leap, and landed on her back. She was so surprised she jumped five feet and spun round like a mad old top, and he laughed so much he fell off, and we laughed till we cried, then he said he'd make a kite, and that's why we came in.

NATALIA. *(Patting her cheek)* What a child— Don't you agree, Doctor?

THE DOCTOR. But I don't think it matters. On the contrary.

NATALIA. Don't you?

(VERA *looks at her, puzzled and disconcerted.)*

THE DOCTOR Bother—I've suddenly remembered—your coachman's on the sick list, and I haven't looked at him yet— *(Going)* —pray excuse me—

NATALIA. He looks as fit as a fiddle to me, rosy cheeks—

THE DOCTOR. Fever, dear lady, can be very deceptive.

(He goes out into the hall as RAKITIN *returns from the ballroom.)*

NATALIA. *(Rising, to* VERA) Mon enfant, vous feriez bien de mettre une autre robe pour dîner.

VERA. *(Stammering)* What— *(Rising)* —oh—

NATALIA. *(Suddenly, as* VERA *makes to go to the hall)* Come here.

(VERA *obeys.)*

(NATALIA *kisses her on the brow)* What a child!

(VERA *smiles awkwardly, kisses her hand, and starts to go.)*

RAKITIN. *(Whispering to her)* I've sent the glue.

VERA. Thank you, Mihail Alexandrovitch, so much—

(She sees NATALIA *looking at her, and hurries into the hall.* RAKITIN *goes to* NATALIA; *she holds out her hand, which he takes.)*

RAKITIN. Natalia Petrovna, what *is* the matter with you?

NATALIA. The sort of thing that can happen to anybody, surely. Like clouds trailing over the sky— *(After a pause)* Why are you looking at me like that?

RAKITIN. *(Simply)* Because when I look at you like this, I feel happy.

NATALIA. *(Smiling)* Ah— *(After a pause)* Open the study door, Michel, will you? It may make a breeze—

(RATIKIN *rises and opens the study door.)*

Welcome, O Zephyr-wind! The wild restless creature— *(Looking round)* Try and drive him out if you can!

RAKITIN And now you've changed again Soft and still, like a summer evening after a thunderstorm.

NATALIA. Ah— Has there been a thunderstorm?

RAKITIN. Not quite, but it was gathering.

NATALIA. *(After a pause)* Do you know, Michel, you must be the kindest man in the world?

RAKITIN. But how dull that sounds—

NATALIA I mean it, you're tolerant, you're affectionate, and you never never change. I owe so much to you; our feeling for each other is so sincere, so innocent— And yet—

RAKITIN. And yet what?

NATALIA. There's something not quite—natural about it, do you know what I mean? Oh, I know we have the right to look not only my husband in the face, but the whole world—and yet— *(Thoughtfully)* I suppose that's why I have this horrid desire to vent my bad temper, like a child with its nurse—

RAKITIN. With me as the nurse? A flattering comparison indeed—

NATALIA. Sometimes one takes pleasure in tormenting a creature one loves

RAKITAN *(Breathlessly)* A creature—one loves?

NATALIA. Of course, why should I pretend? I love you.

RAKITIN. Go on

NATALIA. It comes over me sometimes, like a wave: 'I love him,' I think to myself, and it's a wonderful peaceful feeling, warming my heart through and through— And yet.

RAKITIN. Another yet?

NATALIA. Well, you've never made me cry, have you? And it seems to me that if it *were* love—

RAKITIN. Natalia Petrovna, no more, do you mind?

NATALIA. No more?

RAKITIN. I'm afraid the happiness I possess may melt into thin air.

NATALIA. Oh, it mustn't do that—

RAKITIN I'm in your power; you can twist me round your little finger.

(They look at each other.)

YSLAEV'S VOICE *(In the ballroom)* Is the new tutor back from the dam yet?

MATVEI'S VOICE. *(In the ballroom)* I haven't seen him come over, sir—

NATALIA. *(Rising, quickly)* Arkady's back— I don't want to see him—

RAKITIN. But my dear—your husband—

NATALIA. I know he's my husband, but I just don't want to see him— *(She hurries into the study.)*

(RAKITIN *looks after her, puzzled. A pause.* YSLAEV *enters from the ballroom. He is a prosperous landowner, seven years older than his wife; a kind, pleasant man wrapped in his own affairs. He carries building plans.)*

YSLAEV. Ah, Michel—how are you today, my dear fellow?

RAKITIN. But we saw each other this morning!

YSLAEV. So we did, I beg your pardon— I've had a day, I can tell you, up to my neck— *(Crossing and sitting at the desk, comparing his plan with others in the desk)* D'you know the oddest thing—the Russian peasant isn't at all a brainless fellow, shrewd as they make 'em—but you can tell him something in detail, explain it again, get it crystal clear—and you look at him and realize that not one word has sunk in, not one. The Russian—

RAKITIN. Still worrying about the dam?

YSLAEV. The Russian peasant is no fool, everybody knows that, but he hasn't got that—well, 'love of work,'

is the only way to put it—ah— *(Putting aside the water-colors)* —where's my lady wife, bless her?

RAKITIN. She was in here a minute ago—

YSLAEV. Is it anywhere near tea? I've lost all sense of time; on my feet since dawn, it's appalling—

(As RAKITIN *smiles)*

I amuse you, dear boy—but every man has his niche in life; and being a stolid sort of a fellow, I was born to be a farmer, and nothing more. Beliaev hadn't asked for me, has he?

RAKITIN. Beliaev?

YSLAEV. The new tutor, haven't you seen him? He's no fool, just ran into him in the drive and asked him if he'd see how the workmen are getting on with the new building—

(BELIAEV *hurries in from the garden, from the Right.)*

Well, my boy, how are they? Not doing a stroke, I bet?

BELIAEV. Oh yes, sir, at it hammer and tongs—

YSLAEV. *Are* they? Have they put down the second framework?

BELIAEV. They've started on the third. *(He is more at ease now he is alone with his own sex.)*

YSLAEV. That's something, anyway. Thank you, my boy, very much—

(NATALIA *returns from the study, with a large portfolio of paintings.)*

Ah, Natalia—how are you, my dear?

RAKITIN. But you're spending the whole day asking the same people about their health!

YSLAEV. I've told you, my dear fellow, it's overwork—snowed under! By the way, have I shown you my new winnowing machine?

NATALIA. *(Listlessly turning over pages)* No—

YSLAEV. But my dear, it's the most interesting thing you've ever seen! One flick of the wrist, and the wind whizzes round—a devil of a gale! *(Rising)* I tell you what—we'll just have time before tea— *(To* RAKITIN) —care to see it?

RAKITIN. If you like—

YSLAEV. Coming, Natalia?

NATALIA. I don't understand the first thing about winnowing—

YSLAEV. Back in a trice—

(He and RAKITIN *go out into the garden, arm in arm, and disappear to the Left.* BELIAEV *hesitates and make to follow them.)*

NATALIA. Are you going out again?

BELIAEV. *(Turning)* Me? I was just—going for a walk—

NATALIA. Do you want to?

BELIAEV. No, not—not particularly, I've been walking all day.

NATALIA. That's what I thought. So won't you sit down?

BELIAEV. *(Bowing awkwardly and sitting)* That—that's very kind of you, madame.

NATALIA. You're afraid of me, aren't you?

BELIAEV. *(Overcome with shyness)* Oh, madame—

NATALIA. But when you get to know me, you won't be afraid of me any more. How old are you?

BELIAEV. Twenty-one.

NATALIA. Are your parents living?

BELIAEV. My father is, madame, yes.

NATALIA. *(Turning over pages)* Does he live in Moscow?

BELIAEV. No, madame, in the country.

NATALIA. Have you any brothers and sisters?

BELIAEV. One sister, younger than me.

NATALIA. What's her name?

BELIAEV. Natalia.

NATALIA. *(Looking up, eagerly)* Natalia! How very odd—my name's Natalia.

BELIAEV. Really, madame? *(Awkwardly)* How odd.

NATALIA. *(A pause. She places the portfolio on the table)* And you're very fond of her?

BELIAEV. *(Rising, politely).* Yes.

NATALIA. Our Kolia's already very much attached to you.

BELIAEV. I'm so glad. I am naturally anxious to give every satisfaction.

NATALIA. Oh— You see, Alexei Nikolaich, my idea is for him to grow up—free. *(Sitting in the armchair)* Shall I tell you why?

BELIAEV. Madame?

NATALIA. Because I was brought up in a different atmosphere. *(Motioning him to sit)* My father was excessively stern; the entire household was frightened of him Even now I feel the influence of those years of constraint—I know that the first impression I give is often one of—coldness, perhaps— But I'm talking about myself— Were you kept under, as a child?

BELIAEV. I don't really know. Nobody bothered about me, either way.

NATALIA. But your father—?

BELIAEV. Oh, he was always out.

NATALIA. En voyage, you mean?

BELIAEV. No, he—he had his visiting.

NATALIA. *(Puzzled)* Paying calls?

BELIAEV. In a way, yes, he —*(Blurting it out)* —he went round doing odd jobs.

NATALIA. Ah— I beg your pardon— *(Brushing the subject delicately aside)* Alexei Nikolaich, was that you singing in the garden yesterday?

BELIAEV. Oh— *(Embarrassed)* The lake is so far from the house, I didn't think—

NATALIA. There's no need to apologize, you have a very pleasant voice— *(Suddenly rising)* Do you know, Alexei Nikolaich, I feel at ease with you? My chattering away so disgracefully should prove that! We are going to be friends, are we not?

(She holds out her hand. He takes it, hesitatingly, and after a moment of indecision, kisses it. She draws away her hand, confused, as THE DOCTOR *enters from the hall and sees them.* BELIAEV *crosses with*

exercise books and collects others from bookcase.) *(Embarrassed)* Ah, Doctor—

(BELIAEV *drifts behind chair and daybed.)*

THE DOCTOR. *(Over-hearty)* Natalia Petrovna, I go into your kitchen for my patient, and there he sits the picture of health, wolfing pancakes and onions! How can a man pursue medicine and the innocent profits deriving therefrom, when that sort of cheating goes on?

NATALIA. *(Crossing to the mirror over the desk)* Doctor, vous êtes impayable—

(To BELIAEV, *as he makes to go out.)*

Oh, Alexei Nikolaich, I forgot to say—

VERA'S VOICE. *(In the hall)* Alexei Nikolaich!

VERA. *(Runs in from the hall. Calling)* Alexei— *(Seeing* NATALIA) —oh.

NATALIA. Gracious, child, what a tomboy!

VERA. Kolia wants his new tutor— I mean Kolia asked me about the kite—

NATALIA. I see. Mais on n'entre pas comme cela dans une chambre— *(She tidies her hair in the mirror.)*

VERA. *(To* BELIAEV) She did it!

BELIAEV. She didn't!

(THEY *both burst out laughing.* NATALIA *sees them in the mirror, while* THE DOCTOR *watches all three.)*

(To VERA) You're not making it up?

VERA. Cross my heart—she just fell straight off!

NATALIA. *(Into the mirror)* Who fell off?

VERA. *(Embarrassed)* Oh— It was our swing—and Kolia's nurse took it into her head to—

(She catches BELIAEV'S *eye and they* BOTH *laugh again.)*

NATALIA. *(Suddenly)* Doctor!

THE DOCTOR. Madame!

NATALIA. Could I have a word with you?

THE DOCTOR. *(Hurrying down)* A votre service, madame.

NATALIA. *(To* VERA) She didn't hurt herself, I hope?
VERA. Oh no— *(To* BELIAEV) —but she looked so funny—

(BOTH *laugh.)*

NATALIA. *(Turning to them, severely)* I don't think it was very nice, all the same.

(BOTH *stand, like scolded children.* MATVEI *enters from the hall.)*

MATVEI. *(Announcing)* Tea is served.
NATALIA. And the others?
MATVEI. All in the dining-room *(He goes back into the hall.)*
NATALIA. *(Pointing to* BELIAEV) Vera, allez en avant avec Monsieur.

(VERA *curtseys demurely to* BELIAEV, *and they both follow* MATVEI.)

THE DOCTOR. *(To* NATALIA) You wanted to tell me something?
NATALIA. *(Wiping her fingers on a paint-rag)* Did I? Oh yes— We haven't yet properly discussed your suggestion, have we?
THE DOCTOR. My suggestion? About Vera here and my friend—?
NATALIA. About Vera, and your friend— Well, it was just to say that I'll think it over— Yes, I'll think it over. *(She walks, catches his eye, then goes out into the hall.)*

(THE CURTAIN FALLS quickly, rising immediately on—

ACT ONE

SCENE II

A corner of the garden; late afternoon of the next day. All we see is a fragment of lofty wall overgrown with creeper, with before it a garden seat facing the audience and a narrow path running from Left to Right, the whole set very near the audience. The scene is bathed in a soft glow which deepens as the evening advances.

A pause. MATVEI *and* KATIA *(a buxom, pretty servant-girl of twenty) stroll slowly from the Left; she carries a basket, he a watering-can. He looks worried, she bored. They sit on the seat. A pause.*

MATVEI. Put me out o' me misery, there's a good girl.

KATIA. Matvei Egorych, I don't know *what* to say—it is kind of you—

MATVEI. I'm older than you; it's no good me makin' out I'm not, because I am. But I'm in my prime, and if I may say so, a very good prime too. An' you know yourself what respectable man I am, an' what more does a woman want than a respectable man?

KATIA. Nothing more at all.

MATVEI. Well?

KATIA. Matvei Egorych, it *is* kind of you—but don't you think we ought to wait—

MATVEI. But, Katerina Vassilevna, excuse me—why? If you're afeared you might not be treated with respect, I can vouch for that,—you'll have respect from me, Katerina Vassilevna, the like o' which no female ever yet got from a male, so 'elp me God! I've never had anything but good marks from the master and mistress, never a drop passes my lips, an' I'm a respectable man, what more does a woman want?

KATIA. Nothing more at all, it *is* kind of you—

MATVEI. I know it's kind of me, but what's the answer?

KATIA. Oh dear—

MATVEI. *(Rises, walks, then turns sharply on her)* It's my 'umble opinion, Katerina Vassilevna, that you didn't always 'um an' 'aw like this.

KATIA. *(Confused)* Not always? How do you mean?

MATVEI. It's only lately you've been at it

KATIA. *(Blushing)* I don't know what you're talking about—oh look, here comes that nasty German—

MATVEI. That bilious object, can't stomach 'im—we'll have to thrash it out later—

(He hurries off, to the Right. KATIA *is about to run off to the Left when she runs into* SHAAF, *a fishing rod over one shoulder.)*

SHAAF Vither, o vither, my fair Katerina, ja?

KATIA. The housekeeper sent me to pick some red currants, in a great hurry—

SHAAF. Currant are gut fruit. You are currant fond, ja?

KATIA. I quite like them, thank you—

SHAAF Me currant also fond, he he he! I am fond wid everyting dat you are fond wid. Currant pliss?

KATIA. Oh, I couldn't spare one—I'd catch it from the housekeeper—

SHAAF. I komme catch mit you. *(Pointing to the fishing rod)* What ist dies you call it? Fishing catch mit fishing-schtick? You underschtand fishing-schtick? You like fishes?

KATIA. I quite like them, thank you—

SHAAF. Also fishes me like, he he he. Do you know what I schpeak mit you now? A leedle sonk, a leedle sonk für Katerina— *(Singing, heavily)* 'Katerinchen, Katerinchen, wie lieb'ich dich so sehr,' which means one ting, one leedle ting—loff, loff, loff! *(He tries to put his arm round her)*

KATIA. Oh no, please—an old gentleman like you, it doesn't look a bit nice—give over!—there's somebody coming— *(She darts off to the Right.)*

SHAAF. *(Muttering, sternly, his skittish manner gone)* Shaaf, das ist dumm—

(NATALIA *enters from the Left, arm in arm with* RAKITIN; *she carries a parasol, he a magazine. She is much more restless than before.)*

NATALIA. Ah, Adam Ivanvich—where's Kolia?

SHAAF. Kolia ist in schkul-room mit Lizaveta Bogdanovna vitch titch him de bianoforte blay.

NATALIA. Good— Have you see the new tutor?

SHAAF. No. He zay dat he choin me. *(He bows and shambles off to the Left.)*

NATALIA. *(After a pause, calling)* Adam Ivanych, we'll come and keep you company while you blay mit your fishing-schtick—what do you say to that?

SHAAF'S VOICE. Boodiful lady, vot an honour, vot an honour—

RAKITIN. *(Aside, to* NATALIA) Now why on earth do you want to saddle us—

NATALIA. Come along, handsome stranger. Beau ténébreux—

(They drift out of sight, to the Left KATIA *appears cautiously from the Right.)*

KATIA. That horrible old German, what a blessing, gives me the creeps— *(She sighs, dreamily, then sits on the seat, and hums snatches of a song. Singing)*

Must I love and have no lover
While my heart it glows and burns
Not with passion, but with Russian
Melancholy sighs it yearns—

Matvei Egorych was right, what he said, about humming and hawing—oh dear— *(Singing)*

Not with madness but with sadness
My heart its cruel lesson learns
Not with madness—

(BELIAEV *and* VERA *enter from the Right. He carries a kite.* KATIA *sees them and stops singing.)*

BELIAEV. Katia, why have you stopped? *(Singing)*
Not with sadness but with madness
My heart the art of kissing learns.

KATIA. *(Blushing, and giggling)* Oh—we don't sing it with *those* words—

BELIAEV What are you picking, currants? I love currants.

KATIA. *(Handing him the basket)* Take them all.

BELIAEV. All? I couldn't do that— Would you like some, Vera Alexandrovna?

(As he and VERA *take a few.)*

Shall we sit here?

VERA. Shall we?

(KATIA *wanders off to the Right. They munch for a moment.)*

BELIAEV. Now, *(Showing the kite)* this fellow's tail's got to be tied on. Will you give me a hand?

VERA. Delighted, sir—

BELIAEV. *(As he and* VERA *sit on the seat)* There— *(Arranging kite over her knees)* Mind you hold it dead straight, or there'll be the devil to pay.

VERA. *(Laughing)* I'll be careful

(He takes tail from her and begins to tie on the tail.)

But if you sit like that how can I watch you?

BELIAEV *(Looking at her)* Why do you want to watch me?

VERA. To see just how you're tying it on.

BELIAEV. Oh— One minute— *(Moving round so she can see, and calling)* Katia, where's that lusty treble? Pipe up!

(KATIA *is heard giggling, to the Right.)*

VERA. Did you sometimes fly kites in Moscow?

BELIAEV Good Lord no, I had no time for kites in Moscow! Press with your finger, will you?—No, butter-

fingers, like this— Do you really think that all we have to do in the great city is to fly kites?

VERA. Well, how *do* you spend your time in the great city?

BELIAEV. Oh— Studying.

VERA. I suppose— *(After a pause)* you have hundreds of friends in Moscow?

BELIAEV. Oh yes— D'you know, I don't think this string's going to be strong enough—

VERA. *(Anxiously)* Are you very attached to them?

BELIAEV. I should think I am! *(Intent on the kite)* Aren't you fond of your friends?

VERA. I haven't any.

BELIAEV. I mean girl friends.

VERA. Oh.

BELIAEV. Oh what?

(KATIA'S *voice is heard, singing in snatches.)*

VERA. They don't seem to have been very much in my thoughts lately.

BELIAEV. Anyway, how can you say you haven't any men friends? What about me?

VERA. *(With a smile)* Oh, you're different— *(After a pause)* Alexei Nikolaich, do you write poetry?

BELIAEV. No.

VERA. Oh. *(After a pause)* At the boarding school I went to, there was one girl who did.

BELIAEV. Wrote poetry? Good Lord— *(Using his teeth to tighten the knot in the string)* Was it any good?

VERA. I don't really know. She read it out to us, and we all cried.

BELIAEV. Cried? Good Lord, why?

VERA. Because we felt sorry for her.

BELIAEV. For writing such bad poetry?

VERA Oh no, because it was so sad.

BELIAEV. Was your school in Moscow?

VERA. Madame Bolusse's. Natalia Petrovna took me away last year.

BELIAEV. Are you fond of Natalia Petrovna?
VERA. Oh, very She's been so kind to me.
BELIAEV. Are you afraid of her as well?

(She looks at him; he grins at her.)

VERA. *(Smiling)* A little bit, yes—
BELIAEV. *(After a pause)* And who sent you to the school?
VERA Her mother, she brought me up I'm an orphan.
BELIAEV. An orphan? *(Putting down the kite)* Are you really?
VERA. Yes.

(KATIA *starts to sing again.)*

BELIAEV. My mother died too. So I'm a sort of orphan as well
VERA. Both orphans—
BELIAEV. It's not our fault, so there's no point in getting depressed about it, is there?
VERA. They say orphans make friends sooner than anybody.
BELIAEV. Do they?
(He looks into her eyes. KATIA *stops singing. A pause. He goes back to his work)*
How long have I been here? Three, or four—
VERA Twenty-eight days counting today.
BELIAEV. What a memory! A whole month, in the country— There, finished! Look at that tail, there's a swisher for you—
(KATIA *returns from the Right, goes up to him with her basket.)*
(Rising) Now to get Kolia—
KATIA Would you like some more currants, sir?
BELIAEV. No thank you, Katia
KATIA. *(Disappointed)* Oh— *(She walks slowly back to the Right.)*
BELIAEV. Where is Kolia, d'you know?

VERA. Over in the schoolroom with Lizaveta Bogdanovna.

BELIAEV. Keeping a child indoors in this weather—

VERA. Do you know she spoke very nicely about you yesterday?

BELIAEV. Lizaveta Bogdanovna? Did she?

VERA Don't you like her?

BELIAEV. Never thought about it. *(Finishing off the kite)* She can take snuff till she's black in the face, I'm just not interested.

(A pause. VERA *sighs.)*

Why are you sighing?

VERA. I don't know. What a blue sky!

BELIAEV. Is that why you're sighing? Perhaps you're bored?

VERA. Bored? Oh no—

BELIAEV. You're not sickening for something, are you?

VERA. No, but—well— Yesterday I was going up to fetch a book, and suddenly—imagine—I just sat on the stairs and burst into tears.

BELIAEV. Good Lord!

VERA What could it mean, do you think? Because I'm really quite happy.

BELIAEV. *(Turning to her)* Shall I tell you what it is?

VERA. What?

BELIAEV. Growing pains.

VERA. Oh—

BELIAEV. *(Back to the kite)* So that's why your eyes looked so swollen last night—

VERA. You noticed?

BELIAEV. Of course I noticed.

(She looks at him, he is looking at the kite. A pause. KATIA *is heard singing, very faintly, some way off.* VERA *listens.)*

VERA. *(Thoughtfully)* Alexei Nikolaich—

BELIAEV Hmm?

VERA. Am I like her?

BELIAEV. Not a bit.

VERA. *(Disappointed)* Oh.

BELIAEV. For one thing, you're better-looking.

VERA. Am I?

BELIAEV. *(He looks at her; an embarrassed pause. Breaking it)* Well, Vera Alexandrovna, what about young Kolia?

VERA. Why don't you call me Vérochka?

BELIAEV. Shall I? And what about your calling me Alexei?

VERA. Shall I?— *(Starting)* Oh bother—

BELIAEV What is it—

VERA. *(In a subdued voice)* Natalia Petrovna—

BELIAEV. *(Catching her tone)* Let's go in to Kolia, shall we? He's bound to have finished his doh-ray-me by now—

VERA. Oh, do you think we ought?

(They BOTH *disappear to the Right.* NATALIA *and* RAKITIN *re-enter from the Left.)*

NATALIA. Surely that was Vérochka scurrying along?

RAKITIN. Was it?

NATALIA. But they looked exactly as if they were running away from us!

RAKITIN Perhaps they are

NATALIA. Seriously, I don't think it at all *convenable* for her to be wandering in the garden all by herself with a young man, really I don't.

RAKITIN. I thought you said she was a child.

NATALIA. What? Of course she's a child—but still, it's not quite proper. I shall have to be cross with her.

RAKITIN. How old is she?

NATALIA. Seventeen— *(Sitting)* Where's the Doctor, he hasn't gone, has he?

RAKITIN *(Sitting next to her)* I rather think he has—

NATALIA. Oh, how provoking, why didn't you get him to stay?—Why a character like that should ever have

disguised himself as a provincial apothecary, I can't imagine. He's *so* amusing

RAKITIN. I had an idea you weren't in a laughing mood today.

NATALIA Because I've taken against sentimentality? I have, I warn you—nothing, absolutely nothing, could touch me today, I've a heart of stone— But I wanted to see the Doctor, it *is* provoking of you—

RAKITIN. May I ask what about?

NATALIA. You may not, you already know every single thing I do, exactly why I do it—I have an uncontrollable desire to conceal something from you.

RAKITIN. Since I watch you so closely, shall I tell you one thing I have observed?

NATALIA. *(A pause. She looks at him, then away)* I am all ears.

RAKITIN. You won't be annoyed with me?

NATALIA. I should like to be, but I shan't succeed. Go on.

RAKITIN. For some time, Natalia Petrovna, you've been in a state of constant fretfulness.

NATALIA. Go on

RAKITIN. Not ordinary short temper—but a fretting from within. You appear to be—in conflict with your own self.

(As NATALIA *traces a pattern in the dust with her parasol.)*

I've heard you sigh. Deep long breaths: the sighs of a creature immensely tired, who can never, never come to rest.

(A pause. KATIA'S *voice, singing.)*

NATALIA. And what do you conclude from all that, Monsieur le Microscope?

RAKITIN. I conclude nothing. But it causes me concern—

NATALIA. *(Suddenly impatient)* Oh, for Heaven's sake let's change the subject.

(A pause KATIA'S *voice dies away.)*

RAKITIN. You don't intend going for a drive today—

NATALIA. *(Suddenly)* Tell me, what do you think of Bolshintsov?

RAKITIN. Our neighbor, you mean, Afanasy Ivanych?

NATALIA. Yes.

RAKITIN. Well, I never thought to hear you ask tenderly after a beef-witted old Jumbo like Bolshintsov. Though I must concede I can't think of anything worse against him.

NATALIA. Oh, he just came into my head.

(A pause.)

RAKITIN. Look at the dark green of that oak, against the velvet blue of the sky—the deep glow of those colors —isn't it perfect? What a wealth of life and strength stands embodied in that tree! And then look at this slim young birch, her tiny leaves shimmer with a sort of liquid radiance, as if they were melting before our eyes— And yet, in her way, the birch is as lovely as the oak.

(A pause)

NATALIA. Rakitin, shall I tell you something?

RAKITIN. Do—

NATALIA. Something about you which I noticed ages ago— *(Looking at him)* —I might even say 'observed'— You feel the beauties of Nature in a very rarified way, and expatiate upon them most elegantly; so elegantly, indeed, that in return for the meticulous metaphors you shower upon her, I can imagine Nature saying, 'Really, it *is* good of that tall gentleman to say those kind things about me ' You court her as a scented marquis in red heels might court a rosy peasant girl. The only fly in the ointment, my dear, is that just as the girl would find every single compliment miles above her head, so Nature doesn't understand a word you say And shall I tell you why?

Because, thank Heaven, she is much coarser than you have any knowledge of; and she's coarse because she's healthy Birch-trees don't melt or fade away, for the simple reason they're not highly-strung young ladies, they're birch-trees.

RAKITIN. What an onslaught!—I'm a morbid creature: I see.

NATALIA. Oh, you're not the only one. I don't think either of us is spiritually bursting with health.

RAKITIN. That's another thing I've observed.

NATALIA. What?

RAKITIN. Your trick of putting the nastiest things in the most innocent way. Instead of calling somebody an idiot, you turn to him with a smile and say 'Mon cher ami, you and I are fools.'

NATALIA. Well, if the word 'morbid' doesn't appeal to you, then I'll just say we're both old. As old as the hills.

RAKITIN I don't feel particularly ancient.

NATALIA. Do you realize that not ten minutes ago, sharing the same garden seat, two creatures sat together who can truly claim to be young?

(A pause.)

RAKITIN. You envy them their artless candor, their innocence—in short, their stupidity?

NATALIA. Do you think they're stupid? Oh, Rakitin, that's so like you! Anyway, what's the point of cleverness if it doesn't amuse?

(KATIA *enters from the Right, carrying her basket.)* Ah, Katia! Have you been picking fruit, my dear?

KATIA. Yes, Madame—

NATALIA. Let me look. *(Peering into the basket)* What gorgeous currants, how red they are—

KATIA. Aren't they, Madame—

NATALIA. Not as red as your cheeks, though, Katia—

KATIA. *(Smiling and blushing)* Oh, Madame, do you think so—

NATALIA. I do indeed— *(Suddenly weary)* You may go, my dear—

(KATIA *curtseys and hurries off to the Left.)*

RAKITIN. Another callow creature who appeals to you.

NATALIA. Yes, she's young too *(Rising, suddenly)* It's time Vérochka was in Au revoir, mon ami

(She opens her parasol and walks slowly away to the Right. A pause.)

RAKITIN. She was right, Mihail Alexandrovich Rakitin—every minute of every day, you spend on the lookout for trivialities, and in the end you've turned into a triviality yourself. *(After a pause)* And yet— I cannot live without her; to part from Natalia Petrovna would be to leave life itself— What *is* this unrest of hers? Is she tired of me? I know too well the kind of love she bears me—but I had hopes that in time— What am I saying— she's a virtuous woman, and I am not a philanderer— *(Smiling, wryly)* —worse luck— *(Walking up and down)* What a beautiful day! *(After a pause)* Meticulous metaphors, indeed— And why this sudden passion for simplicity? It all seems to go with that new tutor She couldn't be—no, that's out of the question, she's just in a bad mood, Heaven knows, time will show *(Sitting again)* —And it's not the first occasion in your life, my boy, that after a conference with yourself, you've had to throw all your theories overboard, fold your arms meekly and wait for events. *(He opens his magazine.)*

(BELIAEV *comes strolling back from the Right.)*

Ah, Alexei Nikolaich! Are you after a breath of fresh air too?

BELIAEV Indeed I am, sir! What a lovely day!

RAKITIN Won't you sit down?

BELIAEV. Thank you *(He sits)*

RAKITIN. *(After a pause)* Did you see Natalia Petrovna?

BELIAEV. Yes, walking over to the schoolroom, with Vera.

RAKITIN. And how do you take to the rustic life?

BELIAEV. Oh, capitally, except for the shooting. That's pretty poor.

RAKITIN. Oh. Are you partial to shooting?

BELIAEV. Very Are you, sir?

RAKITIN. I'm afraid not. I'm a deplorable shot; much too lazy.

BELIAEV. I'm lazy too, I'm afraid, but not where sport's concerned.

RAKITIN. And entertaining the ladies—are you lazy where that's concerned?

BELIAEV. You're laughing at me, sir— To tell you the honest truth, I'm rather afraid of them.

RAKITIN. The ladies?—Are you? But why should you think I was laughing at you?

BELIAEV. I don't know, I just did. It doesn't matter, sir, really— *(After a pause)* Could you tell me where I can get some gun-powder?

RAKITIN. Gun-powder? In the town, I should think, but very poor quality—

BELIAEV That would do—it's not for shooting, it's for fireworks

RAKITIN. Fireworks? You mean you can make them?

BELIAEV. Oh yes. I've already picked a spot, on the other side of the lake. As it's little Kolia's birthday tomorrow, I thought it would be just the thing.

RAKITIN. I'm sure Natalia Petrovna will be very touched by your kind thought. *(He has lingered a little over her name.)*

BELIAEV. Oh, do you think so?

RAKITIN. She's taken a liking to you Did you know?

BELIAEV Has she really, sir? I'm so glad— Excuse me, Sir, isn't that a Moscow magazine?

RAKITIN *(Giving it to him)* Do have it, I've finished—

BELIAEV. Oh, thank you, sir—

RAKITIN. It's a poetry review, I take it because they sometimes publish tolerably good verse

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